



## Legislative Power

Elected representatives in a democracy — whether members of a parliament, assembly, or congress — are there to serve the people. They perform a number of roles essential to the functioning of a healthy democracy.

- ⇨ Elected legislatures are the principal forum for deliberating, debating, and passing laws in a representative democracy. They are not so-called rubber stamp parliaments merely approving the decisions of an authoritarian leader.
- ⇨ Oversight and investigation powers allow legislators to publicly question government officials about their actions and decisions, and otherwise serve as a check on the power of various government ministries — especially in the presidential system of governing where the legislature is separate from the executive.
- ⇨ Legislators may approve national budgets, conduct hearings on pressing issues, and confirm executive appointees to courts and ministries. In some democracies, legislative committees provide lawmakers a forum for these public examinations of national issues.
- ⇨ Legislators may support the government in power or they may serve as a loyal political opposition that offers alternative policies and programs. Legislators have a responsibility to articulate their views as effectively as possible. But they must work within the democratic ethic of tolerance, respect, and compromise to reach agreements that will benefit the general welfare of all the people — not just their political support-

- ers. Each legislator must alone decide on how to balance the general welfare with the needs of a local constituency.
- ⇨ Legislators often provide constituents with a sympathetic hearing for their individual complaints and problems — along with help in getting assistance from large government bureaucracies. To do this, they often maintain a staff of trained aides.
- ⇨ National legislators are usually elected in one of two ways. In plurality elections, sometimes called “first past the post,” the candidate with the most votes wins. In the proportional system, often used in parliamentary elections, voters usually cast ballots for parties, not individuals, and representatives are chosen on the basis of their party’s percentage of the vote.
- ⇨ A proportional system tends to encourage multiple, tightly organized smaller parties. Plurality elections encourage a looser, two-party system. Under either system, representatives engage in the debate, negotiation, coalition building, and compromise that are the hallmarks of democratic legislatures.
- ⇨ Legislatures are often bicameral, with two chambers, and new laws generally require passage by both the upper and lower chambers.